

OPINIONS

Don't be a health paranoid

by Nicolas S. Martin

Hardly a day goes by anymore without a morbid announcement about some new kind of threat to our health and well-being. We've had the cigarette link, the coffee link and the bacon and hamburger links—all dire warnings that these pleasurable things are somehow or other connected to a particular kind of cancer.

It's a wonder man has managed to reach his three score and 10 years and is still climbing. Most of the people in the world couldn't make it to 20 before the Industrial Revolution. And by 1900, the average American could only expect to be around until this side of 50.

What wonderful strides we have made. The incidence of most cancers, except among smokers, is stable or declining. Death from heart disease has dropped dramatically. And, as devastating as the AIDS epidemic has become, we had the technical know-how to figure out quickly where it came from and how it was spread.

Given all this, you'd think that everybody would know that it's a great time to be alive. But not a day passes without health activists—amplified by the megaphone of the media—blaring about how we're on our way to doom. We are the healthiest people in all of history, yet we live in constant fear of death from all quarters.

For longevity

Miracle diet peddlers try to scare us into stockpiling all kinds of panaceas for longevity. Popular celebrities keep trying to convince us that whatever we're trying to do to live longer is wrong.

With all the warning drum rolls, how can the average New Yorker cut through the malarkey and know which health concerns are legit and which are bunk?

Fortunately for us, there is a reliable way to analyze the growing number of confusing claims. By closely examining such factors as lifestyle, education levels, and geographic locations, scientific researchers are developing new ways to rank health risks.

What they're finding out will surprise much of the public—and bury a host of unfounded health concerns.

A useful way to rank these threats to life is to determine the number of days by which a health risk will shorten life. One such index, developed by Dr. Bernard Cohen of the University of Pittsburgh, is known as Loss of Life Expectancy (LLE). Based on a wide assortment of predictable factors, a certain activity or condition can be gauged on how it affects human life. For example, a health risk with an LLE rating of 500 would mean it could reduce a person's life by an average of 500 days.

LLE studies have produced a startling array of information. For instance, among the most dangerous things that can happen to any human is to be born male (LLE rating 2,800). Every man starts his life 2,800 days in the hole. Studies show females long outlive males because of natural, social, and self-inflicted hazards.

Another extremely high-risk factor is to be single (LLE 2,000). Being unmarried shortens life an average 2,000 days—almost six years. This particular health hazard is 160 times more dangerous than being a radiation worker (LLE 12) and a thousand times worse than drinking one diet cola a day (LLE 2).

Other surprising comparisons show that being 15 pounds overweight (LLE 450) is 1,125 times more risky than living next to a nuclear power plant (LLE 0.4). Life in the nuclear shadow would lop off only 10 hours of your life. Compare that to the loss of 200 days for the average automobile driver (LLE 200).

Based on estimates by the Union of Concerned Scientists, if all the electricity in our country were to come from nuclear power, it would cost the average American only 1.5 days of his life. This compares with the loss of 50 days from driving a small car (LLE 50) instead of a big one. And consider that it would take 40 days from your life by merely raising the speed limit from 55 to 65 miles per hour.

Converting totally to nuclear power (LLE 1.5) is 200 times safer to human life than living in Louisiana or Mississippi (LLE 350), and 700 times safer than digging coal for a living (LLE 650). More to the point, living next to a nuclear plant is 4,000 times safer than smoking one pack of cigarettes a day.

Other Loss of Life Expectancy rankings that proved to be lower risks than their publicity would indicate include:

- Firearms (LLE 11)
- Fire (LLE 27)
- Drowning (LLE 40)
- Murder (LLE 90)

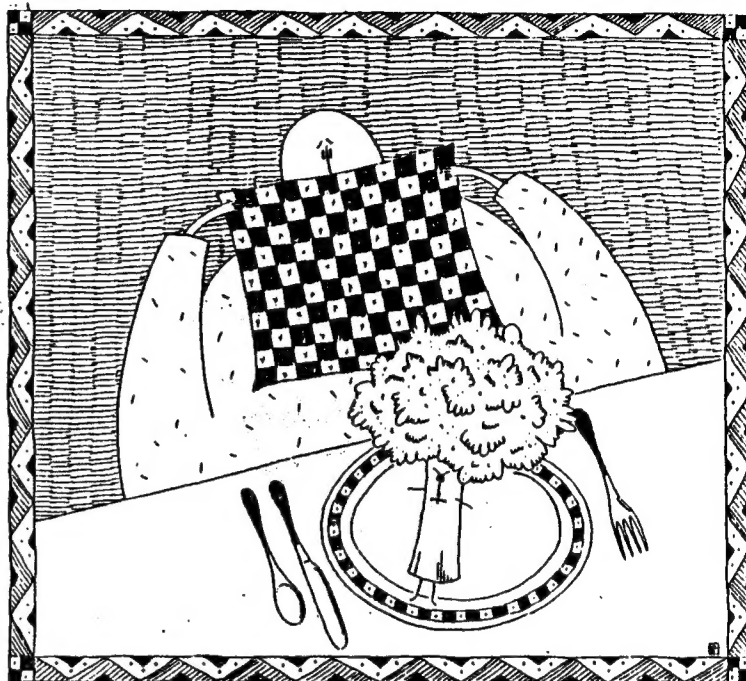
So it appears that the major threats to human health are not from hurricanes, saccharine or nuclear power.

Yes, these threats grab the headlines. But the greatest risks to life are far more basic—gender, body weight and marital status.

Studies also have been conducted in the use of toxic chemicals where similar comparisons hold true.

For example, the alcohol content in one bottle of beer is 14,000 times more carcinogenic than a year's worth of PCBs, despite all the frightening press coverage PCBs have received.

One peanut butter sandwich is 100



times more likely to cause cancer than the pesticide DDT could have before it was banned.

One raw edible mushroom packs a cancer risk 250 times greater than the fumigant EDB, which also has been banned.

Based on the amount of cancer-causing material inhaled, a single cigarette is more hazardous than two weeks of smoggy Los Angeles air.

Even the amount of pollution inside our homes from radon, formaldehyde and gas stoves is much higher than outdoor pollution.

Scientists at the University of California estimate we consume 10,000 times more natural toxins than man-made ones in our food. Apples, oranges, bacon, bananas, cabbage, black pepper and parsley all contain natural carcinogens—as do most other foods.

Even much-favored broccoli contains a natural chemical which mimics the effects of dioxin on human cells.

It is present in an amount 20 million times higher than the dioxin level considered safe by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Fortunately, no deaths have yet been reported from broccoli overdose—just as no deaths have been traced to dioxin in the environment.

The benefits from these kinds of comparisons help us to learn about real risks and to protect ourselves from them.

It also provides a way to assess the value of claims that the world is being poisoned by man-made hazards.

Knowing that the risk of fire (LLE 27) is 675 times greater than the risk of living next to a nuclear power plant (LLE 0.4), how can we take seriously Ralph Nader's accusation about the health threat of radiation from fire detectors, which is about equal to the radiation in potted plant dirt?

And, knowing that broccoli naturally contains huge amounts of a dioxin twin (which probably is harmless), why would we have agreed to spend more than a billion dollars to research the effects of tiny amounts of dioxin in the environment?

A billion dollars spent on swimming safety instruction or on AIDS research could possibly save many lives.

Real hazards

America has got to get wise about health risks.

We can't afford to go off half cocked every time some lawyer or pretty celebrity cries, "Cancer!"

Genuine experts are working hard to alert us to the real hazards to our lives.

It would be a kind and generous thing if some of the panic-dollar leftovers were to be used to support them in their work.

Nicolas S. Martin is the executive director of the Consumer Health Education Council, a non-profit group based in Houston.